

An Uncertain Certainty
John 9
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Today's story takes up a whole chapter in the gospel of John. So, let me tell you the story rather than read it. Jesus is walking along, and he sees a man who was blind. His disciples ask, "Is this guy blind because he sinned or his parents?" Jesus immediately rejects the premise of the question. No one sinned. Disability is never the result of sin. But, he says, this man's difficulty *can* result in a sign of God's healing.

Then, Jesus spits on the ground, mixes his spit with the dirt, and smears the paste on the guy's face. The story does not say if he gave the guy a heads up. Then he sends him to wash it off. And lo and behold, when he washes off the spit and the dirt and comes back to Jesus, he can see.

His neighbors see him a little later and don't recognize him. He is no longer blind and no longer begging. They'd never looked past those categories to really see him. The man says, "No! Really, it's me!" And they say, what happened? He tells them: a guy smeared dirt and spit on my eyes, and I washed it off and now I can see.

Where is this guy, they want to know. Beats me, he says.

So, they take him to the religious leaders to sort things out and the guy tells them the same story: a man put dirt and spit on my eyes, and I washed it off, and now I can see. It also happened to be a Sabbath, and so the religious leaders start arguing: a holy person wouldn't break the Sabbath, but on the other hand, how could a sinner do something like this? So, they ask the man: what do you think?

He says, The guy's the real deal. He's a prophet.

But they still don't buy it, so they call his parents and ask if he'd really been blind since birth. Apparently, this guy's own word wasn't good enough for them. His parents, rightfully say, listen to him. He's old enough to speak for himself.

So, they ask him again: was this man a sinner?

And, getting frustrated, he says, Look, I have no idea if he's a sinner. Here's what I know: I was blind, and now I see. That's it. That's all I know, and it's enough for me.

They argue for eight more verses and then kick him out of town because they just couldn't wrap their heads around what had happened. Hearing about that, Jesus comes back for him and welcomes him into his own community of misfits and outcasts, and before he leaves, he turns to the religious folks and said, "Blind folks haven't done anything wrong. But folks who think they can see—who think they understand it all—they're the ones who are actually blind." The end.

This is by far the longest healing story in the gospels. Usually someone has an ailment, Jesus sees it, heals it, that's it. But here people argue and debate for forty-one long verses and at the end of it, no one is certain of anything except the guy who was healed, and all he knows is: I was blind. A guy put dirt and spit on my face. And now I see. When John Newton wrote Amazing Grace, he left out the dirt and spit part.

There's just a lot of uncertainty the whole way through this story. I don't like uncertainty. I don't think anyone does. We want certainty about the test results when we get the mass biopsied. We want certainty about why that friend stopped returning phone calls. We want certainty about why we didn't get the job we were a perfect fit for. But life is uncertain and too often we get inconclusive results or vague platitudes or just plain radio silence, leaving us with more questions than answers.

It would be nice if our faith could ease some of the uncertainty of life. Sometimes peddlers of religion promise just that. If you study the Bible enough, and pray enough, and are Christian enough, then the answers will become clear. Right? Just like the man in our story. He was blind, but now he sees. Simple as that. That kind of certainty and clarity can be yours, too, if you'll just give your life to Jesus. Right? Except, it doesn't always seem to work that way. Even just the experience of coming to something we might call faith or trust isn't always an experience of certainty.

I don't personally have a neat, tidy testimony of trust and certainty to offer. When was I saved? When did I give my life to Jesus? When did I begin to see? Well, it happened one morning as the light streamed in and we sang Amazing Grace; and it happened in the mountains on a perfect summer morning; and again, one afternoon on a mission trip as I chopped veggies; it happened every time my family joined hands and sang the doxology; and it also happened during nights of deep doubt and fear. When did I begin to see? I don't know. All these times and more. And I still don't see a lot of the time.

Maybe you know what that's like. Or maybe, you have had a moment of life-changing crystal clarity, like the man in our story, but also like the man in our story, you've discovered along the way that even going from spiritual blindness to spiritual sight doesn't fix all the uncertainty.

What *do* we mean when we say God is faithful, or Jesus saved me, or I was lost and now I'm found?

Sometimes that inability to explain it, to put words around it, makes me doubt the whole enterprise. I wonder if I've just made it all up. Is my faith good enough if I can't explain it? Is it legitimate if it can't explain away the pain and uncertainty of life? If being a follower of Jesus seems confusing and not quite the firm foundation I thought it would be, then is it real?

And *this* is what I love about this story. Everyone's confused, and all this guy can say is, a man put spit and dirt on my face. I washed it off. Now I can see. I don't know who he was. I don't know if he was God Almighty or a total fool. I don't know how it worked or why there had to be

spit involved. I just know that he put a paste of earth and body on my face, and I washed it off, and now I can see. That's all I know.

This is not a fancy profession of faith, a well-crafted creed, a tidy testimony. There's precious little certainty. All he has is an experience and a measure of trust.

Something happened, and he doesn't dismiss it as a fluke. He doesn't deny the questions. He admits there's a lot he doesn't know. But he holds onto his experience—something happened. That little kernel of trust in the middle of this whole mess of uncertainty *is* faith.

We have the same opportunity he had. At some point we all have flashes of insight, moments of awe, moments of knowing that we are loved all the way down to our toes, that our lives are held by a mighty and powerful love that conquers even death—we have those moments of crystal-clear certainty where it feels like suddenly we can see. At least for a second or two.

Then the muck and confusion and doubt of life closes back in, and we have, like this guy had, a choice. Do we trust that pinprick of light in all the uncertainty of life?

That choice is the real stuff of faith. It's not intellectual assent or creeds. It's just trust. Nothing more. Nothing less. And it is always a gift. Sometimes a messy, unprompted, out-of-the-blue-not-sure-I-want-this-spit-and-dirt kind of gift, but it is always a gift.

This man didn't ask to be healed. It's not even clear if he consented to a stranger rubbing dirt and spit on his face. It just happened. Out of nowhere. Then he saw things in a new way. And he chose to trust it. He chose to trust the beauty he saw—more than all the questions or critiques or logical arguments against it. He trusted the beauty he saw.

So, if you aren't sure if you're doing this faith thing correctly,

if you're not sure if you're saved or not, or even what that means,

if you don't know how to pray or how to obey or how to believe,

if you don't know where Christ is calling you next,

if you aren't sure how it will all end,

if you, like all of us, are stumbling around with mud on your face, trust this:

Christ comes to us while we don't have it all figured out, while we're still wandering around lost. Christ comes in a million different disguises, sometimes in a blinding flash of light, sometimes slowly like the rising sun, sometimes in earth and bodies.

Our task is not to make it happen or to fully understand, but to wash the mud off our faces, open our eyes and trust the light we see.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2024